

Last week, the House of Representatives was set to enact H.R. 9, the bipartisan, bicameral Voting Rights Act Reauthorization, which strengthens and renews the expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act for another 25 years and reaffirms an enduring principle of our democracy: that every citizen is guaranteed the right to vote. Then, in an unexpected and disappointing development, House Republicans pulled the bill from consideration.

Any delay or effort to weaken this important bill should not be tolerated and it should be promptly sent to the President's desk for his signature.

There is no question that our nation has much to be proud of.

In confronting injustices that have been perpetrated against Americans on account of race or color, brave citizens have endured indifference, intimidation, violence, and even death to secure the rights that are theirs under the Constitution.

Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, my colleague and friend, knows of what I speak.

As a young man 41 years ago, he, along with 600 brave women and men, endured violence and risked death in Selma, Alabama, to secure the most elemental expression of equality in our nation: the right to vote.

Lewis' story is known to each and everyone of us who have the privilege to work with him. John and his fellow marchers were brutally thwarted from crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge on that first Sunday in March of 1965.

But by mustering the courage to speak truth to power and challenge injustice, the civil rights marchers crossed something much larger than the Alabama River, and carried an entire nation along with them: the chasm of indifference and complacency that had lulled too many White Americans into thinking that all was well in the United States.

Theirs was a rare act of moral and physical fortitude that in quick succession shamed, angered, and inspired a nation to complete the march across the river that John and his fellow marchers began that Sunday morning.

Working with a promptness seldom seen, President Johnson and the United States Congress drafted, passed, and enacted the Voting Rights Act on a bipartisan basis in August of 1965.

They did so only after individuals of rare conscience and conviction revealed for all to see that the Constitution is as much a moral exhortation as it is the supreme law of the land.

The Voting Rights Act has played a key role in reversing the widespread disenfranchisement of African Americans and other minorities fostered by segregation and oppression. The success of this legislation has led to significant political achievement and greater minority representation at all levels of government. According to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, today there are more than 9,100 African American and 6,000 Latino elected officials across the country and the number of Asian Americans holding elected office has tripled.

Despite this progress, our democratic system remains imperfect. The specter of discrimination still haunts our election system. As we fight to bring democracy to the Middle East, we cannot take it for granted here at home. To keep faith with the promise and requirements of our Constitution, we must reauthorize the Voting Rights Act.